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Thematic concerns in Khaled Hosseini's novel '*The Kite Runner*'

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Abstract

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is a poignant novel that explores the socio-political history of Afghanistan. The novel intricately weaves themes of betrayal, guilt, redemption, love, and the immigrant experience. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The novel follows Amir, a privileged Pashtun, and his loyal Hazara friend, Hassan. Amir's betrayal of Hassan leads to lifelong guilt. Amir then embarks on a journey to seek redemption that brings him back to his homeland. The novel critically examines class and ethnic tensions, the victimization of marginalized groups, and the challenges of cultural displacement faced by the Afghan immigrants in the United States. Through a postcolonial lens, *The Kite Runner* reveals the complexities of power dynamics, social injustices, and the moral struggles of its characters, making it a compelling narrative of human resilience and atonement.

Keywords: The Kite Runner, betrayal, redemption, ethnic tensions, immigrant experience, socio-political history, post colonialism

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini is a prominent Afghan-American writer, who became widely popular for his debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, in 2003. The novel became an instant success by gaining the attention of readers, especially Americans, by exposing the socio-political realities of Afghanistan. (Aubry, 2020) ^[1]. The novel was translated into more than forty languages and was greatly received by the audience. (Matta, 2019) ^[2]. The plot of the novel was set in the backdrop of the Soviet attack on Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban, which emerged to fight against the Russians after they invaded Afghanistan. The novel succeeds in depicting the harsh historical and socio-political realities of Afghanistan, after the Russian invasion. (Matta, 2019) ^[2]. Owing to these conflicts, many Afghans were forced to depart the country as refugees to either Pakistan or America. The novel exposed the devastations Afghanistan had to encounter because of the Russian invasion and the subsequent rise of the Taliban using the story of Amir and Hassan. Amir, the protagonist of the novel, belonged to the Pashtun ethnic group and Hassan was a Shia Muslim from the Hazara group. It was believed that Hazaras descended from Mongolia and were considered, "mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys" (K. Hosseini, 2003) ^[7]. The people of the Hazara community were considered subalterns and were marginalized. Their existence was ignored and their presence was not acknowledged, while the Pashtuns were considered superior and the aboriginals of Afghanistan. They were the center of all political and economic power. By drawing attention to the socio-political and historical nuances of Afghanistan, the novel uncovered the realities of victimization as well as the exploitation of women and the impact of victimizing them. The novel consists of three parts: the first part talks about the inferior friendship between Amir and Hassan that ends in Afghanistan with an unatoned sin. The second part takes place in the United States and moves around the attempts of the protagonist to redeem his sin and restore his father, Baba's legacy. The last part focuses on the journey of Amir back to Afghanistan to fulfil his responsibilities both as a friend and a son. The novel captures the life and self-actualization of the protagonist Amir, from being inferior to turning resistant to his surroundings.

Discussion

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini is often considered a powerful novel that explores themes of friendship, betrayal, guilt, redemption, and the socio-political turmoil of Afghanistan. The story follows Amir, the privileged son of a wealthy businessman named Baba in Kabul, and his loyal servant Hassan, the son of his father's Hazara servant, Ali. Their friendship is shaped by deep loyalty and an unspoken class divide, leading to profound consequences.

The story is told from Amir's perspective, who shares his childhood in the wealthy Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood of Kabul. Amir is a boy filled with insecurities and sensitivities, yearning for his father, Baba's, approval; Baba is a prosperous and charming man. Amir often feels that he lives in the shadow of Baba's greatness and longs to obtain his love and pride. As Amir contemplates, "I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all, I had killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn't I?" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7]. Hassan, who is Amir's closest friend and servant, belongs to the Hazara ethnic group, which is socially marginalized in Afghanistan. Hassan is incredibly loyal and courageous, always defending Amir, although Amir sometimes struggles with the societal ramifications of their friendship. Hassan and his father, Ali, are employed by Baba, and notwithstanding the social class disparities, Amir and Hassan possess a profound connection, particularly through their shared passion for kite running, a favored Afghan pastime where boys chase down fallen kites after kite-fighting contests.

In the winter of 1975, Amir and Hassan take part in the yearly kite-fighting tournament. Amir is determined to win the event to earn his father's approval, and with Hassan's talent for retrieving kites, they triumph. However, following the tournament, Hassan confronts Assef, a cruel and prejudiced bully who harbors a hatred for Hazaras. Assef attacks and rapes Hassan in an alley while Amir watches in horror, unable to act. "In the end, I ran. I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7]. Consumed by guilt and shame, Amir distances himself from Hassan, ultimately framing him for theft in an effort to drive him out of his life. Hassan and Ali, heartbroken, depart from Baba's household, bringing Amir and Hassan's childhood friendship to an end. Shortly after Hassan leaves, Afghanistan faces significant upheaval. The Soviet Union invades in 1979, compelling numerous Afghan families, including Amir and Baba, to escape the nation. They relocate to Fremont, California, where Baba struggles to adapt to his new role as a gas station attendant, while Amir chases his aspiration of becoming a writer. "For me, America was a place to bury my memories, For Baba, a place to mourn his" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7].

Despite the challenges, Amir and Baba remain close, and Baba ultimately arranges Amir's marriage to Soraya, an Afghan woman with a troubled history yet a kind heart. Baba is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and before he passes away, he is present for Amir's wedding. After Baba's death, Amir and Soraya seek to start a family but encounter infertility issues. Meanwhile, Amir concentrates on his writing career, achieving moderate success, yet he continues to be haunted by his past and his betrayal of Hassan. Amir's history catches up with him when he receives a call from Rahim Khan, a longtime family friend, requesting him to return to Pakistan. "There is a way to be good again" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7].

Rahim Khan tells him, a phrase that sparks Amir's journey for redemption. Rahim Khan discloses startling facts about Hassan: Hassan was truly Baba's illegitimate son, making him Amir's half-brother. Additionally, Hassan and his wife were killed by the Taliban, leaving their orphaned son, Sohrab. This discovery devastates Amir's view of Baba, who had always stressed honor and integrity. "Baba had been a thief. When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7]. Resolved to redeem himself, Amir journeys to Taliban-ruled Kabul to rescue Sohrab. He finds that Sohrab has been captured by a prominent Taliban official, who turns out to be Assef, the same man who assaulted Hassan years earlier. Assef has become a brutal Taliban enforcer, and he viciously mistreats Sohrab. In a savage confrontation, Amir is beaten severely, but Sohrab employs a slingshot—reflecting his father's childhood skill—to blind Assef and assist Amir in fleeing. "For you, a thousand times over" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7], Sohrab tells Amir, echoing the words Hassan once shared with Amir.

Amir assures Sohrab that he will take him to America and give him a secure and loving home. Nevertheless, the adoption process proves challenging, and Sohrab, frightened of being sent to an orphanage, attempts suicide. Although he survives, he becomes emotionally detached, speaking very little after the trauma he has suffered. "I dream that flowers will bloom in the barren land again, but nothing changes" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7], Amir contemplates Sohrab's profound sorrow. Ultimately, Amir succeeds in bringing Sohrab to America, where he and Soraya strive to offer him a stable home. In the novel's concluding moments, Amir takes Sohrab kite running, just as Hassan once did for him. When Sohrab finally smiles, it signifies a spark of hope and the potential for healing and redemption for both of them. "I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and it felt like running with Hassan in the streets of Kabul" (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7].

Betrayal and Redemption

Amir's growing fear and insecurity alongside envy of Hassan paved the way for Amir to betray Hassan of his friendship. Amir feels that Hassan is more admired by Baba than Amir himself. Hassan is a boy with morals, despite his low societal status. The acts of betrayal begin by showing contempt for Hassan's inability to read and changing the words while he reads. Hassan is very aware of all the tricks Amir uses to betray him. He doesn't blame Amir for anything because he is dependent on Amir's family. Hassan readily accepts any task assigned by Amir and performs it with utmost loyalty. The zenith of Amir's betrayal reaches when he doesn't come to the rescue of Hassan, after he was raped by Assef. Amir understands the class differences between him and Hassan and doesn't want to jeopardize his safety for a boy from the minority Hazara community. Amir on the other hand was also afraid of Assef because of his admiration for Hitler and inferior views on the Hazara community. Amir asserts, "I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hasan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hasan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay to win Baba.

Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7].

Amir's reason behind betraying and sending Hassan away is the guilt he carries for not helping Hassan in return, despite Hassan being his most loyal companion. Hassan, after being assaulted by Assef, needs love and understanding, which he is deprived of, to overcome his atrocity. Hassan then becomes the victim and is hated for being tainted. Amir destabilizes the entire family by accusing Ali and Hassan of theft. Baba expresses his grief for the first time after Ali and Hassan decide to leave. Baba and Amir suffer from lifelong guilt and betrayal for their friends. They are all afflicted by the caste system and that costed them their true friendships. Amir realizes his mistake and poignantly admits, "As it turned out, Baba and I were more alike than I'd ever known. We had both betrayed the people who would have given their lives for us. And with that came this realization: that Rahim Khan had summoned me here to atone not just for my sins but for Baba's too." (K. Hosseini, 2003)^[7]. Amir also feels betrayed when he learns of his Baba's infidelity and recognizes Hassan to be his half-brother. Neither the feelings of betrayal nor the punishment are enough to redeem the sins that have been committed by Amir. Rescuing Sohrab from Assef is not enough either. Amir makes his steps close to redemption and atonement only when he decides to take Sohrab to the United States from the orphanage and provide him everything that Hassan was deprived of and to look after him.

Love

Every relationship in *The Kite Runner* is strained at one point or another, thus providing multiple examples of the complexity of various types of love. Hassan's love for Amir is selfless, while Amir's for Hassan is mostly selfish. These two relationships show the nature of brotherhood, love, including jealousy and uncertainty, for the character, although unconscious. Ali, Baba, General, Hassan, Rahim Khan, and even Amir each demonstrate the love of a variety of fathers, offering physical and/or emotional support, compared to their children. Amir and Soraya illustrate romantic love, and their relationship plays an important part in Amir's character development. Hassan's character comes closest to demonstrating selfless love towards all others, and the other characters can learn from his example. Most of the characters are living a life that includes a personal quest for love. And most of them realize that both forgiveness and love of self are necessary before you can love another.

Forgiveness

The idea of forgiveness permeates *The Kite Runner*. Hassan epitomizes forgiveness, as he forgives Amir for his betrayal. Amir takes a lot of time to learn about the mistakes he had committed and ways to seek forgiveness. Baba's treatment of Hassan is his attempt at gaining public forgiveness for what he has not even publicly admitted to have done. The only person who speaks of the nature of forgiveness most poignantly is Rahim Khan. In the letter that he addressed to Amir, he asks Amir to forgive him for keeping the secret of Baba and also admits, hopefully, that "God will forgive." Rahim schools Amir through the letter and suggests that God will forgive all the transgressions, and he encourages Amir to repent. Rahim mentions that God readily forgives everyone who seeks His forgiveness, but people, the

created, take a long time languishing to forgive other creatures. The only way to seek forgiveness is to firstly forgive oneself, and that can happen only when one can truly atone and repent for the mistakes one has committed.

Class and Ethnic Tensions

The prevalent socio-economic conflicts in Afghanistan delineate a clear picture of disparity present between the majority and the minority groups, and portray how people discriminate against each other based on their physical features and religious beliefs. These socioeconomic differences are also explored in the United States. Many immigrants, including Baba and others, give up lives of relative prosperity and security for manual endeavour and meager pay. In addition to the differences between the Muslim sects, *The Kite Runner* also alludes to the differences between the European and Western Christian cultures alongside the culture of the Middle East. The portrayal of the Taliban also expresses the differences in customs, traditions, and culture within the Muslim community.

The Immigrant Experience

The Kite Runner dexterously portrays the problems and shares the experiences of immigrants when one resolves to leave their homeland. Baba and Amir are among the many Afghans who struggle to leave their homeland, under cover of night, unsure of the next passage, taking calculated risks. Many immigrants die even before they reach their new homes, due to several harsh conditions. The life of the immigrants in the host country is fraught with difficulties, and they should also deal with the perception of themselves among the people who stayed there in the country without fleeing. The feeling of being looked at with disparity is encountered by Amir when he visits Afghanistan from the United States. Settling down in a new country as immigrants is not simply about learning a new language or imbibing a new culture, but is about maintaining the customs and traditions of the native culture. Baba loses his status and still has his old-world prejudices, which demonstrates the precarious balance between the old and the new. Soraya and her mother also demonstrate the arduous role of women in balancing the expectations of an old-world culture with the new world in which they are living.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) could be considered one of the greatest works ever written, that dexterously weaves the life in Afghanistan along with its socio-political situations. The novel sheds light on the occupation of Afghanistan by the Russians and subsequent withdrawal, which ultimately paved the way to the rise of the Taliban, after which the lives of the people of Afghanistan are shattered. The families of Baba, along with his loyal servant Ali, and his son Hassan, clearly serve as a microcosm of the entire Afghanistan. How Baba was forced to leave the country, reach Peshawar, and finally migrate to the United States, signifies the kind of circumstances that were prevalent in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. The novel also portrays the experiences of immigrants and the challenges they face from time to time. The novel expresses a variety of themes including betrayal, feelings of guilt and remorse, redemption, love, friendships, and relationships. A postcolonial study of the novel will make the reader

understand the victim-victimizer relationship in the novel and the problems that come with multiculturalism.

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